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at the crisis of
poverty today.

by Liz Theoharis





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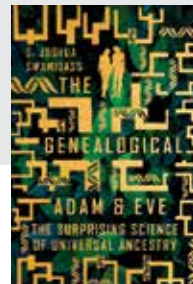
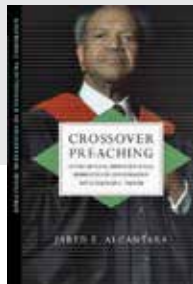
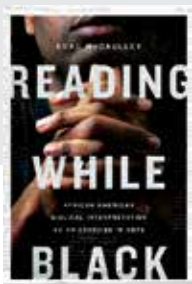


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From the Editor

The troubling events of Jan. 6 helped many realize that we can never take for granted the staples of democracy, including the peaceful transfer of power. The violent uprising, spurred by the outgoing president, offered sobering reminders that our society's most deep-seated pathologies are very much with us. The new administration promises not only relief from the traumatic outrages of the last four years, but also the prospect of seriously engaging urgent issues, from the pandemic and racialized policing to climate change and the crisis of poverty.

But such prospects, encouraging as they are, are not where hope lies—hope is not based on a belief that everything is about to get better. As Danté Stewart reminds us in this issue, hope isn't about simply escaping the fiery ravages of violent empire or wishing the flames would go away. Rather, hope lies in recognizing that God is with us in the struggle and that, ultimately, "The Lord is a healer" and "will keep us through the fiery furnace." That's the mystery, and the power, of incarnational faith.

RESPONSE

Compost and Cigarette Butts

In the January 2021 issue, Ed Spivey Jr. mentioned a particular kind of litter in his humor column, H'rumphs: "Old cigarette butts might eventually compost into something useful to the earth." Sasha Adkins enjoys Spivey's humor but wants to set the record straight: "Many people believe this and thus feel no compunction about littering their cigarette butts. However, the butts contain a plastic filter (cellulose acetate). Butts are, in fact, the most common type of plastic litter on beaches and are a toxic hazard to fish and other wildlife. Don't reinforce the message that butts are environmentally benign, and don't assume your readers know this."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"I'LL TELL
YOU
WHAT
FREEDOM
IS TO
ME: NO
FEAR."

Nina Simone

Civil rights activist and musician

CONTRIBUTING



Liz Theoharis

"I learned from poor and homeless organizers, when I was without health care or adequate housing, that poor people are not sinners—but poverty is a sin," says Rev. Liz Theoharis. Embracing Jesus' words, "Forgive us our debts" (p. 22) pushes open our theological imagination. Through Theoharis' organizing with the Poor People's Campaign and the Kairos Center, she challenges Christians: "Why do we worship a homeless person on Sunday and ignore one on Monday?"



Danté Stewart

"The sacred texts in our lives were not simply the Christian scriptures ... the good news was also bound to voices of Black folk," says Danté Stewart, who considers his identity as a Black Southern Christian to be pivotal to his writing and theopolitical education. He says that this good news can "speak a destiny for us that is beyond the ugliness of the empire." On p. 26, Stewart honors his ancestors and reminds us to hope beyond the fiery furnace of America.

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11.7%

Poverty rate in the U.S. as of November, up from 9.3 percent in June 2020

7.8 million

Number of people in the U.S. who have fallen into poverty since the summer, including 2.3 million children

11.3%

Percent of children in the U.S. with at least one unemployed parent, as of August 2020

OUR MISSION

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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HEARTS & MINDS

BY JIM WALLIS

THE ROAD AHEAD

In January, Sojourners entered its 50th year—a half-century of working to inspire hope by articulating the biblical call to social justice and a vision of the “beloved community.” When I began reflecting on that impending anniversary several years ago, my first thought was: “I don’t want to go back to my desk the morning after that celebration.” I also knew that I wanted Sojourners to go on long beyond the founder, and that we would need a new generation of leadership to take Sojourners into the next 50 years. When I began to think about a successor, one name kept coming to mind: Adam Russell Taylor. I met Adam 20 years ago when he was a student in my first class on faith and politics at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Adam has been involved with Sojourners for the past 20 of our 50 years. His personal story,

**FAITH AND JUSTICE IS
STILL MY FIRST LOVE
AND VOCATION.**

“I AM FILLED WITH A DEEP SENSE OF GRATITUDE.”

scholarship, breadth of experience, vision, sense of vocation, and ordination in the Black church all uniquely prepare him to lead Sojourners as its first African American president. This transition has been in the works since 2016, when the board and I first selected Adam to be my successor. It's been an amazing journey, and I'm so grateful that Adam is coming home, am very committed to his success, and I look forward to our continuing collaboration in the years ahead.

Still as founder, and now also ambassador, I will continue to write for Sojourners, record my *Soul of the Nation* podcast, expand my speaking engagements, offer strategic advice to Sojourners and others, and stay centrally involved with some key parts of our work—such as the convening of faith leaders in coalitions such as the Circle of Protection and the Faith Table and projects such as Lawyers and Col-
lars in our partnership with the National African American Clergy Network.



Jim Wallis is founder and ambassador of Sojourners.

In July, I will join Georgetown University as a full-time faculty member, at the kind invitation of President Jack DeGioia, who has asked me to establish a new chair and found a new center focused on faith, public life, and the common good. Expanding on my 10 years of teaching at Georgetown, this new position will enable me to focus on teaching, mentoring, writing, and speaking, and will become a new base for convening leaders, doing public forums, and advocating for justice—all in a remarkable and unique venue. Faith and justice is still my first love and vocation, and Georgetown offers me a new perch to do the things I am most called to do.

I am filled with a deep sense of gratitude as I make this important transition—for the members of our board who have guided Sojourners for five decades; for the hundreds of staff members and fellows who have done the hard and often grinding work; for Sojourners' co-founders with whom I have lived and worked; and for the current staff who will now take this mission forward. I'm particularly grateful for the countless people who say that Sojourners has changed their personal faith, vocations, and public lives and, through that, have helped to change both the church and the world. That, I have always believed, will be Sojourners' most lasting legacy.

For these 50 years, I am very grateful. All I can say is: Thanks be to God. And I look forward to the road ahead for all of us. ✕



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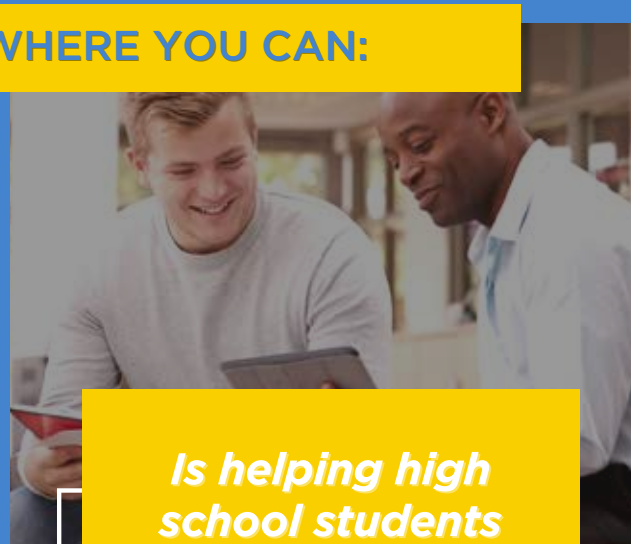
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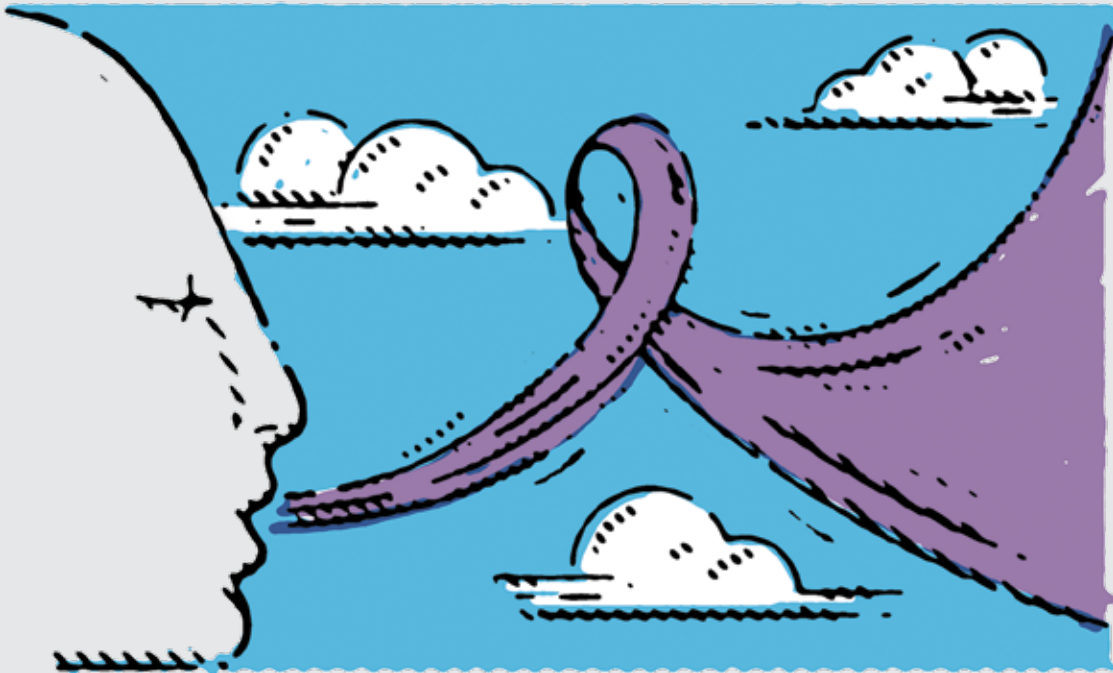
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JESUS GETS OUR GRIEF

Lent is an invitation to converse with grief
in all its expressions.



2

The other day, during a Zoom call with my younger sister, I said something that sounded harsh—maybe even inappropriate. “You know, there’s a part of me that is honestly glad Mom isn’t alive during this pandemic.” She was quiet for a moment, “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

With untreated COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and her radical hospitality, my mom would not have listened to public health officials’ guidance on the coronavirus. She would have visited her friends to check on them, taken meals to elderly neighbors, and watched over her grandchildren, all while smoking half a pack a day.

Mama, strong and resilient for more than 60 years, would have thought herself impervious. So, Mama would have caught the virus. And, because she and Daddy were tied at the hip, she would have passed it on to him. Daddy, with his emphysema, high blood pressure, a heart that endured two strokes, and a penchant for salty, fatty foods, is definitely vulnerable to COVID-19.

But Mama died from a sudden heart attack in February 2019. Daddy is at home during this global pandemic. Our brother cares for him and a nurse checks in. Daddy is safer and Mama is no longer suffering. We, their children, don't have to navigate the heartbreak of losing parents during a global pandemic, of not being able to say goodbye properly.

This has been a year of negotiating grief. The only way I've learned to do this is to be unafraid to talk about it—in all its ugliness and inappropriateness. Talking about grief allows me to live with it.

Lent is an invitation to have a conversation with grief, in all its expressions. Jesus shows us that grief is part of the human experience. Scripture says that Jesus was a man of many sorrows, that he was acquainted with our grief. Jesus wept. He was rejected. He was betrayed by friends. He grieved over systemic and relational brokenness.

Yet, he puts words to his grief. He is not afraid to express it. "Father," he prays, "let this cup pass from me." His tears and blood mingle to reveal the intensity of his grief.

"Couldn't you stay awake with me one hour?" he asks, heartbroken and surprised by his friends asleep in the garden.

From the cross, Jesus says: "I thirst" and "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Lent is our time to reflect on how Jesus embodied grief. One of the gifts of Lent is the encouragement that Jesus gets it. We are not alone; we are not unseen in our grief.

Last year during Lent, I began a daily practice of breath prayers. It started as a way to be subversive and prophetic—I'll cultivate a spiritual practice that relies on my breath, I thought, to combat the grief and anxiety caused by a respiratory virus.

The practice of breath prayers involves praying a short, five- to seven-syllable prayer. On the inhale, you pray a name for God that is meaningful to you: "Nurturing Mother," "Kind Savior," and "Gentle Healer" are some of my favorites. On the exhale, you pray your request: Give me peace; hold me close; be near me in my grief. Breath prayers have been the spiritual practice that has sustained me and given me words for my grief.

The day Ahmaud Arbery was killed, I

"GOD OF JUSTICE, HOLD ME CLOSE. WOUNDED HEALER, PROTECT THE VULNERABLE."

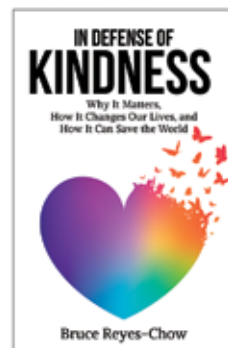
prayed, "God of Justice, hold me close." On the day I learned that the novel coronavirus was ravaging brown and Black communities, I prayed, "Wounded Healer, protect the vulnerable." On the day there was rioting in my neighborhood after George Floyd was killed, I prayed, "God who hears, respond to our cries."

Putting words to my grief in a simple, short prayer not only has empowered me to press through the pain, but it has given me a way to connect with Jesus, who gets it.

Wherever you are this Lent, say the true thing about your grief. And, if you can, say it to God. ✱

Osheta Moore is author of *Shalom Sistas* and *Dear White Peacemakers*, an Anabaptist pastor, and host of *Shalom Sistas: A podcast for peacemakers*.

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COMMENTARY

BY MIGUEL PETROSKY



KEEPING JESUS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE INTERTWINED

In 1980, about 6 percent of Christians globally were Pentecostal—now it's 25 percent.

The Passion Center is a Christian community in Pembroke Pines, Fla., about 20 miles north of Miami. The organization is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, but it neither emphasizes its denominational ties nor resembles a traditional church. This self-described “holistic ministry training center” has no building, but it has a mission to keep Jesus and social justice intertwined.

The faith community was founded and is led by Elizabeth Rios, who earlier started the Center for Emerging Female Leadership in New York. Members of the Passion Center used to meet regularly for community service projects, local demonstrations advocating for the priorities of marginalized communities, dinners in local restaurants, and a monthly comedy night for their neighborhood. The pandemic shut down the in-person gatherings. Unlike many other Pentecostal and charismatic churches, the Passion Center leadership had no qualms about following the science. They had no building to close; they just transitioned their ministries online. The Passion Center is one example of Pentecostals who don't mind getting politically engaged in justice work to further the reign of God here on earth.

Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing Christian movements in the world. In 1980, about 6 percent of Christians globally were Pentecostal—now it's 25 percent. As of 2014, there were 10 million Pentecostals in the U.S. In many places around the world, Pentecostalism is the predominant face of Christianity. These rising numbers are shifting Christianity's demographic center from the prosperous North to the global South.

While certain media outlets highlight the enthusiastic support some Pentecostals have given to right-wing political leaders, including former

U.S. president Donald Trump and Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, the politics of Pentecostals, like their ecclesial structures and lines of authority, varies widely. In the United States, less than half of Pentecostals-charismatics lean toward the Republican Party, one-third lean toward the Democratic Party, and 20 percent have no political leanings, according to the Pew Research Center. Pentecostals don't fit neatly into a box. The organization Pentecostals and Charismatics for Peace and Justice and similar efforts offer leadership to U.S. and global Pentecostals on justice issues, such as nonviolence, racial equity, and creation care—a reminder that Pentecostalism began as an interracial movement and held pacifist positions.

While Christianity in general has been in numerical decline in the U.S., American religion maintains significant influence in the rest of the world. In New Zealand, for example, Anglican priest Scottie Reeve has criticized the right-wing nationalistic pastors and speakers—nearly all exports from the U.S.—who regularly keynote national conferences. “Send us those who will renew our commitment to the poor rather than to a political ideology,” Reeve wrote. “Send us the ones who live in urban neighborhoods rather than gated communities. Send us those who will enlarge our hearts for the other rather than making us fear the stranger. Send us those who measure the success of their ministries with names rather than numbers.”

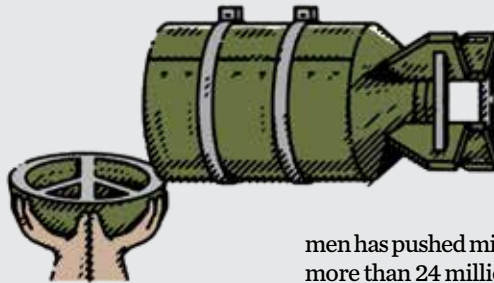
The prominent U.S. ministers Reeve mentions by name are all from a Pentecostal or charismatic background. Given the scope of Pentecostalism's influence and its global popularity, this isn't surprising.

Christian nationalism and QAnon (and adjacent conspiracy theories) fanned the flames of the violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in January. These elements are part of growing and interconnected webs within evangelical and fundamentalist communities, and they include Pentecostals and charismatics. They not only threaten our democratic republic, but they also fundamentally undermine the witness of the church. Pentecostals and all Christians must see the lies perpetrated by these groups as a warning about the dangers of toxic nationalism—and an invitation to return to the gospel message of justice as universal as the global church. ✦

Miguel Petrosky (@petrosky_miguel) is a writer and journalist in Washington, D.C.

M

A DANGEROUS BLANK CHECK



March 25 marks the sixth anniversary of the start of the brutal and tragic war in Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition's offensive operations, code-named Operation Decisive Storm, began with airstrikes and a naval blockade against Houthi rebels with the goal of restoring Yemen's ousted government. With early and extensive U.S. military support, this war has created what many consider the most severe humanitarian crisis on the planet.

During his presidential campaign, Joe Biden promised a policy reset on Yemen. "I would end U.S. support for the disastrous Saudi-led war in Yemen and order a reassessment of our relationship with Saudi Arabia," Biden said. "It is past time to restore a sense of balance, perspective, and fidelity to our values in our relationships in the Middle East. President Trump has issued Saudi Arabia a dangerous blank check. Saudi Arabia has used it to extend a war in Yemen that has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, pursue reckless foreign policy fights, and repress its own people."

Biden's promise offers hope to those committed to peace, but his administration must do much more than help pick up the pieces. Yemen needs humanitarian aid, an end to the blockade, and good faith diplomacy.

The Biden policy reset comes at an urgent moment. The United Nations is sounding an increasingly louder alarm of famine if conditions in Yemen do not improve. Before Christmas, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres warned that Yemen was in "danger of the worst famine the world has seen for decades." More recently, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Mohamed Abdi said, "Yemen is not starving. It is being starved."

Tragically, the Saudi- and United Arab Emirates (UAE)-led coalition's war on Ye-

men has pushed millions to the brink of famine and caused more than 24 million people to rely on food assistance for survival. Aid agencies describe Yemen as the worst place on earth to be a child. The conflict has claimed the lives of at least 85,000 children under the age of 5. There are several things President Biden can do.

He must first reverse the Trump administration's Foreign Terrorist Organization designation on the Houthis, enacted in January, as this will be a recipe for more conflict and famine by blocking aid delivery and complicating an already complicated peace process.

To make good on his campaign promises, Biden must block weapons deliveries to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He must also work with Congress to sign into law a War Powers Resolution, prohibiting intelligence sharing, logistical support, and spare-parts transfers for coalition airstrikes. Such a demonstration of support from Congress will help Biden exert meaningful pressure on the warring parties to end the violence and recognize the constitutional role of Congress in war-making decisions.

Biden must also restore and expand humanitarian-aid funding to all parts of Yemen to address malnutrition and disease and urgently curb the spread of COVID-19. His administration must pressure Saudi Arabia and the UAE to meet and expand their humanitarian funding pledges for Yemen.

Finally, Biden must work with the United Nations to bring about a negotiated solution to the conflict—one that brings the warring parties to a ceasefire, ends the blockade, and creates a lasting peace that includes all parts of Yemeni society.

As we approach this heartbreaking anniversary of unimaginable human suffering, action on Yemen must not wait a moment longer. By working with Congress, the U.N., U.S. allies, regional and local actors, and representatives of Yemeni civil society—especially women and girls—the Biden administration can help all sides find the road to peace in Yemen. ❖

**"YEMEN IS NOT
STARVING. IT IS
BEING STARVED."**

Hassan El-Tayyab is legislative manager for Middle East policy at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

SELF-EVIDENT TRUTHS

3



I find myself thinking about the significance of “firsts,” the role of faith in the morality of the nation, and the place of race and gender in that project. Vice President Kamala Harris’ ascent to one of the highest seats of political power is historic, unprecedented, and awe-inspiring. Like Barack Obama before her, it is a first that has ushered in, for many, a renewed faith in the nation. Multiply the emotional impact of that first by whatever number captures the firestorm of the past four years, and that faith easily transforms into a belief that “morality” has been secured and that things are going to be, basically, okay.

This train of thought is, I believe, dangerous and wrong. I do not discount the feelings Harris evokes. The emotional impact of Harris’ election registers for me very personally as a Black woman. When I initially heard that Joe Biden and Kamala Harris had won the election, my first thought was exhilarated shock at Trump’s defeat. Then, as that

INSTITUTIONS HAVE THE CAPACITY TO INCORPORATE CRITIQUE—TO ASSIMILATE AND CO-OPT IT, INSTEAD OF BEING TRANSFORMED BY IT.

fact sunk in, I realized that this outcome meant the election of a woman of color—a Black woman, a woman of South Asian descent—to the vice presidency of the United States. Weeks later, the words still seemed somewhat strange, as if my brain was having trouble wrapping itself around the reality. My inability to readily speak her new position reflects to me the depth of her significance, and the change it portends for how I and future generations of Black and brown girls and women will be able to envision and speak of ourselves. I pause, however, at the unexamined triumphal connections being made between Harris, morality, and political futures.

We need to problematize the narrative of Black success, women's success, and Black women's success as the proving of American virtue and redemption. We also need to think critically about our articles of "faith" in the nation and our general interpretations of the moral tilt of the universe hinging on American "success" (however that is defined).

Harris is making history at the same time that multiple pandemics—COVID-19, white supremacy, and misogyny, to name a few—are raging. I don't think this is an accident, nor do I think it is simply backlash. Many people have spoken about the capacity of institutions to incorporate critique into their functioning—to assimilate and co-opt it, instead of being transformed by it. Angela Davis writes in *Abolition Democracy* that the inclusion of people of color into positions of influence within oppressive systems does not necessarily undermine those systems, but often strengthens them.

Our very frameworks of race, gender, and moral overcoming—of "firsts"—have similarly been largely formed inside of, rather than in opposition to, dominant systems. They can elaborate a shortsighted definition of success whose selective, limited horizons enable American ills, at home and abroad.

If we move forward with anything from this unprecedented historic moment, let it be with a renewed belief in the need for moral clarity—and hope that it will come. ❧

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a writer, United Methodist deacon, and doctoral student in religious studies and African American studies at Yale University.

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DEEP ECONOMY

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

THE BASIC MATH OF CLIMATE CHANGE



T

Trump is behind us now—four years of constant provocation and useless cruelty are over, which means ... we have about nine years left for the most important task any civilization has ever taken on. I want to lay out the basic math of our situation, because if we are at all serious about taking care of the earth God gave us (and we should be, since that was literally our first instruction), that math rules the day.

1) We are currently on a path to raise the temperature of the planet 3 degrees Celsius or more by century's end. If we do that, we can't have civilizations like the ones we're used to—already, at barely more than 1 degree, wildfires and hurricanes have begun to strain our ability to respond.

2) In 2015, the world's governments pledged in Paris to try and hold the rise in temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The United States, shamefully, exited that agreement for a time, but now we're back in.

3) To meet that target, scientists say we need to cut emissions in half by 2030 and then go on cutting until, by 2050, we've stopped burning fossil

**WE HAVE NINE YEARS LEFT—
450 SUNDAY SERMONS—FOR
CIVILIZATION'S MOST
IMPORTANT TASK.**

fuel altogether. But the crucial year is not 2050. It's 2030—if we haven't made huge cuts by then, we'll miss the chance to stop short of utter catastrophe.

4) Those cuts are entirely possible. Using the brains God gave them, engineers have made incredible progress: Solar power and wind power are now the cheapest ways to generate electricity on this planet. You can buy, for a reasonable price, an electric car if you must have a car. We could actually do this.

5) But—and here the math turns more directly toward moral issues—it means we'd have to *not* do some things. For instance, we'd have to stop letting our banks and investment managers try to make money off global warming—currently they're lending and investing huge sums in the fossil fuel industry.

6) And we'd have to face up to the underlying math: While it's true that humans are heating the planet, not *all* humans. The top 10 percent of us, those who make more than \$38,000 a year, are responsible for more than half the world's carbon emissions. We need to change our lives, but more importantly we need to change the systems we've set up: Instead of trying to maximize our own wealth, we need desperately to try sharing it, so that people in the poorest parts of the world can have solar panels too—so they don't have to choose between development and a disaster that will hit them hardest.

That's it. Climate change is a math problem. A hard one, and one that requires that we examine our societies and our souls. But no matter what we do, the math won't change, and the most important of all the numbers is that part about nine years ... about 450 weeks—450 Sunday sermons. Really, that's it. ♦

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org and a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*

Protecting democracy.



Danielle Hall for Sojourners

Rev. Alyn E. Waller (left) and Rev. Adam Russell Taylor serve as poll chaplains in Philadelphia on Election Day 2020.

For the 2020 U.S. election, Sojourners trained and mobilized faith leaders to protect the vote through the Lawyers & Collars/Turnout Sunday partnership with the Skinner Leadership Institute and the National African American Clergy Network.

When disinformation turned into violence on Jan. 6, Sojourners called for President Donald Trump's removal from office and advocated for a peaceful democratic transition. We continue to hold power accountable and equip people of faith to resist injustice and embrace the gospel call to love every neighbor as ourselves.

Watch our election impact video at sojo.net/democracy and join the ongoing movement to protect the vote.

SOJO.NET

EYEWITNESS

4

“THEY STARTED
YELLING AT ME, ‘WE
HATE THE MEDIA! GET
OUT OF HERE!’”



‘JESUS IS MY SAVIOR. TRUMP IS MY PRESIDENT’

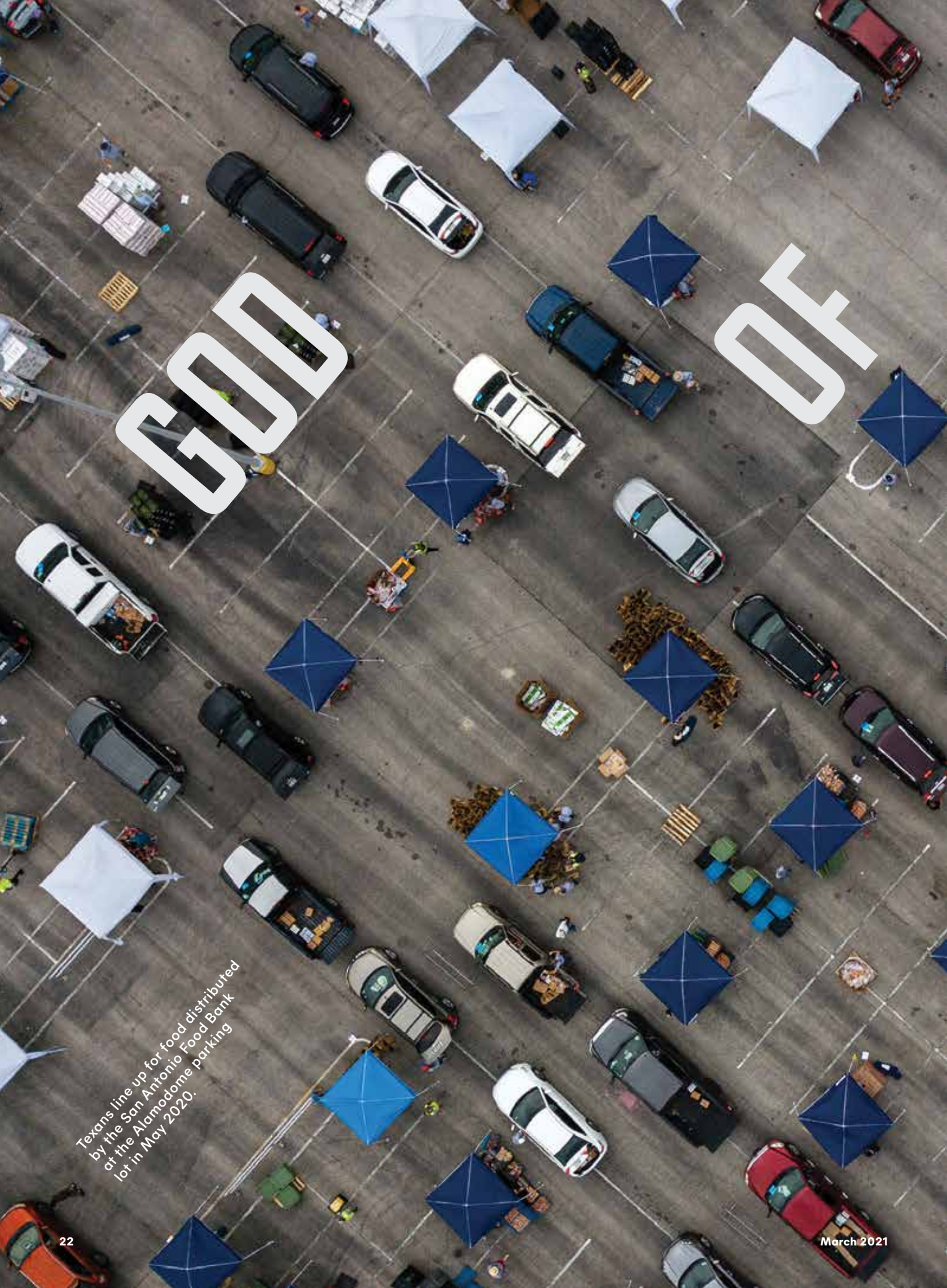
“I got to Federal Plaza around noon, right when Trump’s speech was starting. I sat with a group called the America First Coalition. They had plugged a phone into a megaphone and were standing in a circle listening to the speech. I sat right in the middle to listen. Ten minutes in, Trump started speaking about his distrust of the media and [how they were] complicit in the ‘rigged’ election. That’s when I started getting a little bit fearful. I could see people looking at my press pass. When I said that I was a graduate student journalist, one of them said, ‘We don’t like people in grad school.’ And then they started yelling at me, ‘We hate the media! Get out of here!’

A larger group started forming in the street. I [ended up] at the front of the group when they walked to the Capitol. I saw people in bulletproof vests, people with military tactical equipment, walkie-talkies, helmets, goggles; people had batons in their backpacks. There was this acceleration toward the Capitol. I remember thinking there is just nothing that’s going to stop the momentum of this group. I was surprised by the lack of law enforcement that I saw, especially after having covered racial justice protests since May, where there’s always such a heavy police presence.

I heard flash grenades go off, which sound like bombs. There was smoke in the air [and] families there with little kids just watching the people climb up the Capitol walls. It was striking how many American flags there were. And along with all of the shows of nationalism, there was a lot of religious signage—posters saying, ‘Jesus is my savior. Trump is my president.’ I’m just so curious how people got to this point of conflating Christianity and the American flag with what happened [that day] and with Donald Trump.”

Madison Muller is a graduate student studying social justice and investigative journalism at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism. She spoke with Sojourners’ Jenna Barnett.



An aerial photograph of a large parking lot filled with cars and several blue square canopies. The scene is viewed from directly above, showing the layout of the vehicles and the distribution of the canopies across the lot. The cars are of various colors, including white, black, and red. The blue canopies are arranged in a somewhat regular pattern, with some clusters and some isolated units. The ground is paved and shows some wear and tear. The overall scene suggests a large-scale event or distribution point.

GOOD

OF

Texans line up for food distributed
by the San Antonio Food Bank
at the Alamodome parking
lot in May 2020.

An aerial photograph of a large parking lot filled with numerous blue and white pop-up tents. Several cars are parked throughout the lot, and some areas have stacks of boxes or supplies. The scene suggests a large-scale outdoor event or a relief operation.

ABUNDANCE

THE GOSPEL IS INDEED GOOD NEWS FOR THE
POOR—EVEN IN A CRISIS OF POVERTY.

By Liz Theoharis

Since I began to help organize a movement to end poverty, people have said to me that our goals are too ambitious—that demands for human rights and human dignity are both politically inconceivable and impossibly expensive. They quote the Bible, arguing that since Jesus said, “the poor will be with you always,” it can’t be God’s will for everyone to share in the abundance of our world.

But when I read the Bible, including and especially Jesus’ statement above, what I see from Genesis on through the New Testament is a constant revelation of God’s will that no one should be made hungry, sick, homeless, underpaid, indebted, or bereft by the violence of social injustice. I read an ongoing indictment of those who would take and keep the wealth of our world for themselves and cause others to suffer. I hear the biblical command to “fill the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:53), not simply as “caring for the poor” as an end result but by advocating for policies and structures that lift the load of poverty—admonishing nations to “do no wrong to the immigrant, the homeless, the children. And do not shed innocent blood” (Jeremiah 22:3).

BIBLICAL ROOTS OF JUSTICE

The founding story in the Bible tells of a diverse group of freedom fighters who have been on the march since the burdens of Egyptian slavery and scarcity got to be too much, since leaders like Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and many others—named and unnamed—came forward to say, “It doesn’t have to be this way.” And God sent plagues and pandemics that only hardened the heart of the ruling authorities, who doubled down on misery, dispossession, and militarization.

After approaching the Sea of Reeds, having to get neck-deep before the waters parted, wanting to be free and full so much that they were willing to die, the freedom fighters crossed to the other side, as the weapons and chariots of empire were swallowed up.

But the freedom fighters had to keep marching. They weren’t yet in the promised land. They had escaped from Egypt only to still struggle. They had pulled off a mighty protest, but it was going to take more. They had been organizing for weeks, months, years. And people were still suffering. They were still suffering.

So they sang, “Hold on just a little

bit longer.” And the people called out to Moses and to God for food, for water. The water was too bitter at Marah—too much oppression had turned it so—so they demanded water, and God provided. There was no food—empire had hoarded it for the wealthy—so God rained down manna, the substance of prosperity and liberation for all, which no one could hoard, which no one could lack, which showed up day after day.

Then, in Deuteronomy (and Leviticus), the people set forth laws that eliminate state tribute, call for a year of remission of debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-11), free the

slaves (15:12-18), forbid interest and pledges from the weak (23:20, 24:17), and dictate that harvest leftovers be left in fields for the hungry (24:19). The prophets suggest constructing society around the needs of the poor: Stop gentrifying communities, stop allowing the cops to terrorize, start paying your workers just wages, build your society from the bottom up.

Veritably, these instructions remind the people that God led them out of slavery in Egypt and—with the highest commandment, the *Shema Yisrael*—that we are to love our God with all our heart and mind and soul. And we are not to worship gold or riches or mammon. We are to organize society around the least of these, who are most of us.

THERE NEED BE NO ONE POOR

We learn in the New Testament that the first thing the early church did was make sure everyone was living their fullest lives. Acts 4 reminds us that “all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.”

Indeed, the Bible, and Jesus in partic-

ular, is clear on what is required of those who profess to be followers of Jesus and are committed to bringing God’s empire of love, justice, and forgiveness here on earth. Jesus travels through the land healing, expanding health care, feeding the people, and turning over tables and systems of injustice.

The prayer that Jesus teaches his followers speaks to his core beliefs and commandments: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the

WHAT IS GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR EXCEPT FOR THE END OF POVERTY, A SHARING OF ABUNDANCE?

evil one.” The Lord’s Prayer is very clear that the material position of the people is of great interest to God. It exhorts people and nations to release those imprisoned by injustice, feed everyone, and resist the temptations and trappings of the unjust, those who pass policies that hurt women and children and the poor. Forgiveness is a key theme—but it is a theme connected to generosity, overturning unjust systems, and community prosperity. It’s about reconstruction and restitution, not just saying “I’m sorry.”

Later in Matthew, Jesus instructs the rich young man who wishes to inherit eternal life to give literally everything to the poor and come follow Jesus. In fact, the logic of Jesus’ teachings is about abundant life for all. And it follows that nations should spread love and justice; they should forgive debts and trespasses throughout the whole world. We must bring good news to the poor—not the bad news of eviction, the lack of health care, unemployment, poverty, or the racism of empire.

ABUNDANCE OVER SCARCITY

Throughout sacred scripture—including the codes, policies, and regulations in the Bible as well as in the prophets, gospels, and letters—there is a call to end exploitation and to attend to the poor, a mandate of Sabbath rest and Jubilee years, and a



prohibition against charging interest on survival loans or profiting from pandemic. There are commandments to pay living wages promptly, to bring equity to legal proceedings, to give to everyone who asks of you, to welcome the immigrant neighbor, to care for the needs of the entire community, and to stop depriving those who are poor of their rights.

In the books of Moses, the prophetic critiques, the parables told, and the ministries described throughout the Bible, God's beautiful creation is lauded, and God's intention for that abundance to be a blessing to all—not an elite few—is the central theme. In truth, the instruction in scripture is that society must be organized around the needs of people who are poor, suffering, and marginalized—that when we lift from the bottom, everybody rises. Whenever policies to share in the blessings of creation are lifted up in the Bible, there is a reminder of exploitation, oppression, and the need to struggle for liberation, lest we forget that while empire, unjust policies, and immoral systems lead to poverty, this is not God's will.

To return to that passage weaponized against those challenging the inevitability of poverty and scarcity: When Jesus says, "the poor will always be with you," he is referencing just such a policy and just such a reminder, from Deuteronomy 15. In this chapter, we are told that as long as

we forgive debts, free those in bondage, give to others without any expectation that we'll be paid back, and care for each other in times of crisis—when we build a movement of those considered expendable, when we confront the powers and principalities, when those wounded by deep social and economic wounds heal through mutual solidarity and moral action—only then will there be "no poor among you."

But we are also warned that if we instead refuse to organize our society around the needs of the poor rather than the endless, systemic greed of the powerful, then poverty and want can never be banished.

HOPE IN HARD TIMES

At this moment, this is a hopeful lesson and a hard one. We live in a nation where there are 140 million people who are poor or who are one fire, health crisis, job loss, or severe storm away from deep poverty. A nation where, during a pandemic, more than 12 million people have lost their employer-based health care—adding to the 87 million who already had inadequate health care; where nearly 12 million renters are behind in rent and could face eviction in the coming months; where 26 million people reported not having enough to eat, but 72 billion pounds of food goes to waste each year.

In truth, these are exactly the times when prophets rise up to remind us of God's demand for justice—and God's judgment of those whose power and wealth rests on the dispossession of the rest of society. Jesus' ministry began in a time like ours, when the Roman Empire was strangling millions of poor people and calling it peace. He began by declaring, drawing directly from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." What is good news to the poor except for the end of poverty, a sharing of abundance? The prophets go on to proclaim "liberty to the captives"—a phrase that, in turn, comes from the Jubilee laws of Leviticus.

The Jubilee laws, the *shemittot*—the Sabbath year prescriptions from the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus references—are both pietistic and economic; the instructions include making a release of debts as a way to honor and worship God. They explain that God commands people to give to their neighbors and to

ensure that all needs are met. They assert that people having to cry out against their creditors is a sin against God (not just the mistreatment of another person). The core message of these passages is the elimination of poverty and inequality and God's will that all have enough. Notably, the Sabbath—the rest required by God in order to worship God, protect life, and ensure material well-being and abundance for all—is one of the earliest legislations in the Bible.

Indeed, Jesus proclaims jubilee in his inaugural sermon and through his peripatetic ministry. He references manna and systems where everybody has enough and no one goes hungry. He heals the sick, feeds the hungry, and turns over the tables of oppression.

Christ Jesus does not proclaim: "I didn't make enough food for everyone to eat." Nor "my abundance will trickle down from the rich to the rest." He does not suggest that anyone should profit off a pandemic, nor that "I want Peter to have to rob Paul" to be able to pay bills. He does not say "Get a job!" to the homeless of society, nor "you shall not bear children" to the refugee mothers of his community. He does not proclaim that a little charity is as good as you all can do, nor that the powerful should be exempt from taxes but that the poor shall pay for the business escapades and pleasures of the rich. He does not teach that private insurance companies can pay families of those bruised and battered by the legions of empire in order to leave the governing authorities unaccountable. And he never once suggests charging lepers a co-pay or cutting people off from access to health care during a public health crisis.

In the midst of all this suffering, despair, and loss of life, let us remember that the God we follow cries out, "I am the one who led you out of Egypt." That God reminds us that how we treat the poor, how we treat the immigrant neighbor, is how we honor and worship God. So, in this season, who do we worship? What do we honor? What will we do? And, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, "Who will join God?" ❖

Liz Theoharis is a theologian, ordained minister, director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, and the author of *Always With Us? What Jesus Really Said About the Poor*.

THROUGH THE FIRE

*Radical endurance is forged in struggle,
love, and audacious hope.*





By DANTÉ STEWART
Illustration by JAMIEL LAW

*“To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever,
to strengthen you against the loveless world.
Remember that: I know how black it looks
today, for you. It looked bad that day,
too, yes, we were trembling. We have not
stopped trembling yet, but if we had not
loved each other none of us would
have survived. And now you must
survive because we love you, and
for the sake of your children
and your children’s children.”*

— *James Baldwin,*
THE FIRE NEXT TIME





I entered the doctor's office, met by the smiling face of the receptionist. "May I help you?" she asked, as I tried to maneuver my lips to smile to cover how terrible I was feeling. "I need to get tested." She didn't ask me what test I needed, or where I had come from, or what I was feeling. She checked me in and pointed me to the waiting area—a cold and lonely and familiar place.

I wondered if they knew how terrified I was for me, for my wife, for my son, for our baby not here yet. I wondered if they knew that my body was on fire, that my mind kept alternating between anger and regret for letting my friend in the house with no mask. I wondered if they knew how my stomach emptied the chopped carrots, old celery, and the warm chicken noodle soup into their clean toilet.

"Danté Stewart," the nurse called out to me, "right this way." I could hear my heartbeats through my ears as I took the steps through the cold and lonely and familiar clinic. She called in the other nurse. They took my pulse. They put the little white and blue device with the red numbers on my left middle finger. 97. Good. 106 bpm. My heart is racing. As I felt the blood pressure cuff tighten its grip on my arm, the nurses gave that look.

The doctor walked in about 15 minutes later. "Yep," he said in the cold and lonely and familiar voice, "You're positive." My heart sunk. I could hear the beats in my ears again.

My mind, exhausted and hot, thought about all the other sick Americans like me. I thought of plastic barriers between bodies hoping to protect one from another. I thought of the touch we had missed, the dreams that were deferred, the meals never to be had, the kids locked up in rooms trying to get an education, the grocery workers who loved us, the nurses who loved us, the sanitation workers who loved us, the teachers who loved us. I thought of all of us and how sick we were and how hot we were and how lonely we were. I thought of how much our country had failed us.

I wonder if the country knows how terrified we were. I wonder if they knew how much we lost—how lonely, how sad, how hopeless, how exhausted.

I had read a recent *Atlantic* essay on the terrors associated with something that is trying to destroy you slowly from the inside. It does not care who you are. Its purpose is to destroy your body in the worst ways possible. I pulled out my journal to tell myself how much I was feeling and how much I didn't like this feeling and how angry I was at myself for this feeling and how angry I was that so many had to feel this feeling and how many never made it to the other side to tell about it.

I'm lonely. I hate this anxiety. I'm nervous. I did some push-ups. I need to lose some weight. I'm not healthy. I'm feeling weird. I'm lightheaded. Not gonna lie, I'm a little scared. I still feel hot, I wrote day after day. *Terrified.*

Ten mornings and nights full of no sleep and cold feet and a racing heart and a hot body, and I am able to touch my wife and I am able to touch my son and I am able to drive in the car and feel the cool breeze come across my face.

I felt guilty as I scrolled through my Twitter feed and read how many Americans didn't make it through. I was not rejoicing in the grandeur of my young body and its ability to recover and withstand what wants to destroy you. I was sad. So many didn't make it. There is a story of their suffering that tries to diminish how terrified they were and how much we are failing them and how much we are failing us. I watched the "Faces of COVID" stories and saw all those beautiful faces and all those strong hearts and all of these mommas and daddies and friends and lovers become memorials of our love and our failure. I wanted better for us. I wanted us to not be forced to endure the worst of American greed and its insatiable desire to put profits over our dinners with each other, our hugs, our kisses, our late-night trips, our cutting up over card games, our lives when they were "normal."

But there is no normal for us. At least not for now or for the fore-

seeable future. This is the country that has been decided for us. This is the country that is as sick and as committed to destroying us and as unfamiliar as we know this virus to be to our bodies. We will have to learn how to breathe beyond the suffocation and live beyond the terror and make sense beyond the profits and find pleasure in the midst of the madness. We will have to be there for one another in ways we never imagined. For those of us who survive this—this pandemic, this constant assault on our humanity, these compounded traumas—we are together in the shattering of our hearts and our bodies into a million pieces. Can we imagine ourselves being better than the ways we have learned not to feel, not to care, not to remember, not to endure?

That's the thing about growing up American: You grow up in a place as confused and as beautiful and as terrible as we all know ourselves to be.

WHAT WE HOLD ONTO

There's an old King James Bible sitting on my bookshelf. It is black, dusty; the gold edging on the pages shines as light hits it. I don't know what year it is from, but it is rugged. The jacket is missing, and the threads are unloosed from one another. It has been tried. It has traveled. Now it is with me, sitting here, containing words that conjure up memories of poetic sermons, sweaty mics smelling like old metal and stank breath, words that flowed from my momma's mouth with a sort of normalcy I could never quite understand.

It was neither a new dialect nor was it ecstatic speech that carried with it a divine magic. It was her language, the language of my grandmother, the language of her mother, the language of all the Black folk between my old yellow house, my grandma's red-brick house, and the white-stained brick church that told us we were somebody. It was the "talking book"—to hear it is to hear the voice of God in conversation with Black bodies in a land that has known neither God nor love nor Black bodies.

This past year, a year full of so much death and destruction, I've found myself returning to that old book, trying to find some language that would keep my feet planted under the shaking. The sicker I got, the more I read. Like so many people during this time, my heart is numb. My stomach churned as I watched George Floyd crying for his momma; my body trembled as I tried to find some way of making sense of the image of a little Black



We will have to learn how to live beyond the terror and make sense beyond the profits and find pleasure in the midst of the madness.

girl screaming "No Justice! No Peace!" in a country that allowed white boys with badges and white boys with Bibles and white boys with bullets to terrorize us all with impunity. This past year has forced us to see discolored flags and torn flags and red flags and blue and black flags wave as young children wonder about themselves and wonder about a country that knows not commitment but lies. Black bodies pressed to the concrete, and gasping for breath, and trying to breathe, and trying to love flags whose image is not one of safety but of suffocation. White people in white houses and with white badges and with white bullets and with white ballots trying to keep the country more white and less free and more sick and less familiar. Old folk, young folk, rich folk, poor folk, gay folk, straight folk, medical folk, retail folk, sanitation folk, transportation folk, documented folk, undocumented folk, incarcerated folk, free folk, and all the folk in between, all these gasping for breath through masks inside cold hospital rooms and gasping for breath outside in dark, lonely places, trying to breathe because we learn to be terrible and to become addicted to things that kill us. We have learned to be American, but we have not learned how to love and to take one another's future seriously.

Like everybody, I've been terrified. I've been trying to find hope, something more free, more loving, more just, better than what we're offered.

So I returned to this book to say something to me. I cracked open the old, dusty pages. I didn't go to that old Bible because it would convince me that the terrible things would eventually get better. No. I returned because I knew that there was something about these words that the old Black country folk held on to in the burning.

HOW TO LIVE IN THE WAITING

In the Hebrew Bible, there are two main verbs that refer to waiting. One is to wait with expectation; the other is to wait in the tension of enduring. It is not passive. It is an active struggle to live in the face of despair. I often think of my grandmother, the ways she would conjure up old Hebrew stories as if they were her own. The three boys in the fire in the book of Daniel who endured unspeakable horrors and had the audacity to live and dance was not just a good story. Their bodies and

their struggle were momma's own. The hope was in the struggle, the burning, the tossing, the turning—God is in the hope.

To hope—to believe in the better, to believe in your future, to shout in the great fire as your country is burning, to stare down lions, to shake the foundations of the empire, to make meaning in the face of death, to fail, to create, to live and to love—this is the stuff of hope. It is sometimes giving it up to begin again. It is not an assent to a construct or a phrase that resigns oneself to nostalgia or myths or lies. It is the audacious belief that one's body, one's story, one's future does not end in this moment, but shall live, rejoice, and be free.

When I think about my momma and how much she and all those Black folk held onto old stories, I don't just see people who courageously shake kingdoms and who preach audacious messages of liberation. I also see people who know what it means to live with deep trauma and still love themselves enough to believe in their future. These prophets are women and men, even children, who are caught up in webs of violence, histories of oppressions, systems of dominance, and the ongoing struggle to make a life when life is messy and seems merciless, who learn how to not let horrific tragedy have their futures.

If there is hope to be found and to be had and to be given up on and to be picked back up again, it is in the waiting, the living, the moving, in spite of the ways we have failed to wait, it's hard to live, and a struggle to move.

The three Hebrew boys that my momma loved to talk about didn't simply dance through the fire, nor did they simply make it out of the same flames that consumed others. The miracle of this audacious narrative, and the audacity of my momma, and the audacity to stare down terror is also about how violent empires don't have the last say over oppressed bodies. They may be able to enslave our people, plunder our resources, and construct great fires to destroy both our bodies and our stories, but at the end of the day we are liberated and shown to be powerful in the midst of the burning. Empires will not always win.

We endure. We endure when we give up on the lies and try to make something out of a place confused about us and itself. We endure when we love one another enough to create a world where our fellow neighbors are healed, are free, are not alone, are not complacent with the terrible ways we have learned to live with one another. We endure by knowing the things we lost may not come back—or if they do, they may never be the same, and that will have to be okay. We endure by letting go and moving on without crushing memories or crushing people. We endure by learning how to remember and how to be complete and how to be better. We endure together.

WHEN THE TERROR ENDS

Weeks after I recovered, I went back to my old house, the place where I grew up, the place that made me. Black rural South, the country. My son was playing the dirt just like I did. His face glowing, his white teeth glistening as he smiled at the way the white South Carolina dirt stayed under his fingernails like old friends. I walked into the house and told my momma about how much I missed all her good chicken and dirty rice, how I wanted to talk about being sick, and how happy I was to smell her turkey legs, and how happy I was to not be sick, and how happy I was to be home, and how happy I was for us, and how much I felt loved. She smirked. "The Lord is good," she said. "The Lord is a healer and a keeper and will keep us through the fiery furnace." She laughed. I laughed. We laughed together.

At that moment, we were not terrified anymore. I was not terrified. I saw my momma conjure up ancestral tongues and hot, sweaty sermons and lyrics and love songs. I saw her conjure up dark memories and broken dreams and bent bodies and epistles of love and liberation. I saw her like the prophets, trying to shake kingdoms and rock souls straight and



straighten bodies back up again and love us in simple ways that cooled our bodies and warmed our spirits and stopped our trembling.

I saw the meaning. I saw the hope. I saw what I was looking for.

We shall not always suffer.
We shall not always be terrified.
We can shout.
We can dance.
We can love.
We live.
Loved.
Loved.
In the fire.



Danté Stewart has written for *The Washington Post*, Christianity Today online, The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, and other sites and publications.





‘911 Operator. What Is Your Emergency?’

How faith and community leaders are reimagining public safety.



By Stephanie
Russell-Kraft

Illustrations
by Claire
Merchlinsky

When a woman experienced an opioid overdose during a morning breakfast service at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in downtown Eugene, Ore., church staff quickly administered naloxone, a medication designed to rapidly reverse an overdose.

Then the police arrived, lights blazing, according to Bingham Powell, rector at St. Mary's.

Police interference during a drug overdose or mental-health crisis can often turn deadly, putting some of society's most vulnerable further at risk for harm. Thankfully, when the officers arrived on the scene at St. Mary's that day, no one was killed. But a police response can also impair the situation in other ways. The woman who had overdosed became frightened by their presence and left.

"This isn't a story of police misconduct," Powell said. "It's just a story of the police showing up, and it caused the person to run away and not get the help they needed."

What if someone else had arrived on the scene first? In Eugene, it's entirely possible that they could have. For nearly three decades, the city has been home to CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets), an emergency-response program that sends experienced unarmed crisis counselors and EMTs in response to mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness-related crises. The program has become a model for other cities looking to shift community resources away from armed policing in favor of social services.

Unless a situation is violent, the team at St. Mary's prefers calling CAHOOTS in a crisis, according to Powell.

"Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor, and that is a guiding principle for how we want to be in this world," Powell explained. "We want to help people, and having police be the *only* resource is not helpful."

'A PARADIGM SHIFT'

In the 1980s, the U.S. defunded public safety programs in favor of increased policing, which has since become increasingly militarized. Now, the tide is turning. The Black Lives Matter movement has not only shed light on systemic racism and embedded white supremacy ideologies, but on the brutal impacts of overpolicing and the excessive use of deadly force.

People with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to



be killed during a police encounter than other civilians, according to a 2015 report by the Treatment Advocacy Center. That same year, a *Washington Post* investigation found that a quarter of the people shot by police in the United States were suffering from a mental or emotional crisis at the time of their death. Most of those officers were not responding to a crime, but rather to a call about a mentally fragile person behaving erratically.

In 2020, following the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, efforts to defund or abolish the police moved into the mainstream. Activists around the country continue to call on their communities to radically reimagine what public safety and harm prevention could look like without police at the front lines.

"A lot of alternatives to the police don't always look like alternatives to police at first glance," said Brendan McQuade, assistant professor of criminology at Uni-



**People with
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encounter.**

Most CAHOOTS calls are wellness checks to visit people sleeping in parks, people having psychotic episodes, people who are elderly who haven't been seen, people who have made suicidal statements on social media, or employees who haven't shown up to work, according to Climer.

"By our very existence, we prevent police interaction with those folks in those circumstances," Climer said.

Church leaders in the area say this is why they turn to CAHOOTS in a crisis.

"We call CAHOOTS because we don't really need the police and the force that they bring," said Rev. June Fothergill of Ebbert United Methodist Church in Springfield, Ore. In some instances, she notes, police presence has only escalated conflicts.

Climer said his work has been led in large part by his faith. "We are really rooted in this idea that people are worthy of having compassion and love given to them."

**TAKING POLICE OUT OF
THE EQUATION**

If CAHOOTS is designed to replace police as the first to respond to a crisis, then Seattle's LEAD program is an alternative for who comes second.

LEAD, originally an acronym for Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion and recently renamed to Let Everyone Advance with Dignity, is a program created in 2011 to keep people suspected of low-level crimes out of the criminal legal system.

Instead of booking suspects on charges and bringing them to court, police could refer LEAD participants to a case management program in order to receive social

versity of Southern Maine. "They're set up as a mental health thing or as a harm reduction measure."

Such alternatives involve "a paradigm shift to something that centers our shared relationships and shared investments," McQuade added.

While there is tremendous work yet to be done, there exist already examples of municipal programs where public health and harm reduction are the priority. CAHOOTS is one of those.

A NEW CRISIS RESPONSE

CAHOOTS, which was launched as a community initiative in 1989, provides mobile crisis intervention around the clock in Oregon's Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area. The program is funded by the cities and managed by the White Bird Clinic, a community health center in Eugene.

Crisis responders can be reached

through the police nonemergency line or 911. They are dispatched in pairs, are not trained in law enforcement, and do not carry weapons. Not all of them are licensed clinicians, though all are trained to respond to mental health issues.

Ben Adam Climer, a former CAHOOTS EMT and crisis counselor, described it as a "paraclinical" model. "You have a person who's skilled at telling whether a person needs to see a licensed clinician," he said. This helps keep the program staffed, he added, and is part of the reason it has worked so well for decades.

Climer, a Mennonite who holds two theology degrees, now consults for CAHOOTS and is working to develop similar programs around the country. Among the many cities looking to replicate CAHOOTS is Los Angeles, where the city council unanimously passed a measure in the summer of 2020 to develop a police-free crisis response for calls not involving weapons or violence.

services like housing or drug treatment.

A 2015 study by University of Washington researchers found that people who went through the LEAD program had a 58 percent lower likelihood of arrest and 39 percent lower likelihood of being charged with a felony compared to the control group. Cities across the country—including Atlanta; Santa Fe, N.M.; Baltimore; and Albany, N.Y.—have followed the model of Seattle’s LEAD and created similar programs of their own.

Pre-arrest diversion programs, such as LEAD, are not typically considered an alternative to policing. Abolitionists re-

main skeptical of their impact. “It is a really good release valve for interrupting the flow from police to jail, but it relies on police to do it,” said Victoria Law, journalist and co-author of *Prison by Any Other Name: The Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms*. If police officers still see their primary role as arresting crime suspects, even when they are nonviolent, then a pre-arrest diversion program won’t help.

Lisa Dugaard, executive director of the Public Defender Association in Seattle (the nonprofit that runs LEAD), said the program has been designed to become less police-dependent over time.

Faith leaders are uniquely positioned to advocate for alternatives to policing.



“From the beginning, we built a second road into LEAD case management, which was meant to facilitate a shift,” she said. Police were given the option to make so-called social contact referrals, which meant referring people to LEAD programs outside the context of probable cause to make an arrest. Now, community members have the option to call LEAD directly, bypassing the police altogether.

“It has never made sense that police were the institution that responded to these kinds of problems,” Dugaard explained. “But because they *were* called to respond, we needed an off-ramp for those contacts.”

As the culture changes and more people come to appreciate the value of nonpolice and noncarceral responses, the LEAD program can slowly remove police entirely from the equation in many instances. That shift has already begun. The newest version of the program is designed to “only have occasional need to coordinate with law enforcement and is primarily in lieu of a police response,” according to Dugaard.

Rev. Jenny Partch of Highline United Methodist Church has been involved in the effort to bring a version of LEAD to Burien, Wash., where LEAD’s approach to crises has been one of the few things disparate community members can agree on.

Partch is hopeful that a LEAD program can keep members of the community who are experiencing homelessness and substance-abuse disorders out of jail. She recalls a man who frequently came to the church’s cold-weather shelter. He was incarcerated after police ran a warrant search on him while he stood outside the church building.

“He had a drug addiction that he was trying to quit,” Partch said. “It’s difficult as a pastor to have someone like that come to you. This gentleman wanted me to pray with him and was really remorseful for things he had done. But without the programs and the community to help him, we just couldn’t get him over that addiction.” Had LEAD been available then, it might have kept him out of jail, she said.

“Ultimately, if this matures as the model for our community, there will be a phone number that rivals 911 in people’s ability to remember it, and there will be much greater capacity,” Dugaard said.

But the program isn’t there yet. It’s better to think of LEAD as a proof-of-concept rather than a finished solution. To bring this to scale, the program needs to be funded at or beyond the level at

“We are rooted
in the idea that
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with compassion
and love.”

which police forces are currently. “It’s not a matter of a few million dollars,” Daugaard said. “It’s a genuinely large investment that is needed.”

“Continuous care is the fundamental gap in the system everywhere,” she added. “We are closer to being able to fill that gap in Seattle-King County than any other community, and we’re nowhere close.”

THE FIGHT AHEAD

LEAD and CAHOOTS both prove that it’s possible to respond to myriad crises without the police, thereby reducing harm in the community and lowering the potential for accidental injury and police misconduct.

The biggest barriers facing both programs are *not* that they don’t work. It’s that they’re still relatively unknown, underfunded, and only as good as the other social services available to treat chronic problems like homelessness, drug addiction, and poverty.

When the CAHOOTS program is understaffed, response times can be slow. They eventually arrived on the scene where the woman had overdosed at St. Mary’s in Eugene, according to Powell. But not until after the woman had fled.

“Sometimes the problem isn’t CAHOOTS’s fault,” Climer said. “It’s that there isn’t much they can offer the person. We don’t have enough treatment centers and we don’t have enough resources out there for people.”

Partch believes it’s her role as a faith leader to advocate for systemic change alongside specific programs like LEAD.

“If we really believe in every person

being in the image of God, then we need to work on the systems that *don’t* see them as equal, sacred beings,” Partch said.

Partch and other faith leaders are lobbying Burien’s city council to reallocate budget resources from policing to human services, among other changes.

“I completely support the LEAD program,” she said. “But we also have to continue to see the bigger picture. We have multiple systems that all feed together and they’re all broken at this point.” For example, programs like CAHOOTS and LEAD don’t directly address systemic racism and racial disparities in policing and social services.

Faith leaders, who are often at the front lines of helping people in vulnerable situations are uniquely positioned to advocate for alternatives to policing, Daugaard said.



“I think that the faith community has a huge role in naming that, and saying, ‘we are not good with just stopping the old systems. We need there to be a meaningful response to the pretty desperate situations that people are in,’” Daugaard said.

Along with pushing for systemic change, faith leaders can also ask their communities to adopt programs similar to CAHOOTS and LEAD or point to them as models of programs that are proven to work.

“A lot of times the debate gets flattened into police or no,” Daugaard said. “The missing piece has been the design and occupation of that space, such that people have a thing to be *for*.” ✱

Stephanie Russell-Kraft reports on the intersections of religion, culture, law, and gender.

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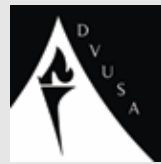
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THE ONENESS OF LINES: DRAWING, RATHER THAN TALKING, MAY BE A KEY TO ACCESSING SPIRITUALITY— AND ALSO EMPATHY.



Visual
Art

It's long been known that empathy may be inherent in portraiture—walking a mile in the shoes of one's painting subject. As the renowned 15th-century painter and monk Fra Angelico put it, "He who wishes to paint Christ's story must live with Christ." New research reinforces this association between artmaking and spirituality.

A 2020 Fetzer Institute study of U.S. spirituality, which includes

16 focus groups and 26 in-depth interviews, reports that more than 80 percent of its 3,600 respondents self-identified as somewhat spiritual, and about 60 percent aspired to be more spiritual. Novelty, researchers used drawings as an "inductive research tool" to understand better what respondents meant by "spirituality," said

Veronica Selzler, lead author of the Fetzer study and strategy director at Hattaway Communications in Washington, D.C. Art allowed participants to define spirituality creatively rather than prescriptively. “It was through these drawings that the diversity and common threads began to emerge,” she said.

The study reproduced 38 drawings in which respondents, aged 18 to 71, interpreted spirituality. The “slightly spiritual/not religious at all” Dale, 69, drew five clouds—one perhaps smiling—and grass as his “happy place, but you could call it a spiritual place.” Daniel, 20, who is “very spiritual/not at all religious,” drew a self-portrait praying on his knees before Jesus.

Respondents offered more “tradition-centric” views when asked to write “top-of-mind thoughts” about spirituality compared to drawing the same. Drawings “gave research participants a new tool to articulate an idea that many had never considered or put words to before,” Selzler said. “People are bound by the language they have to talk about big ideas such as spirituality.”

By poring over drawings, researchers could transcend “an artificial dichotomy between religion and spirituality that a close-ended question can’t fully capture,” Selzler said. The study also found half of respondents engage in art—including painting, singing, and listening to music—as spiritual practice at least weekly, second only in the study to the rate of prayer.

This—and the study’s focus group findings that associate spirituality with empathy—are consistent with what Ashlee Whitaker, Brigham Young University Museum of Art’s curator of religious art, has observed. (Whitaker wasn’t involved in the study, but BYU’s museum rewrote its mission and vision statements recently to emphasize empathy as a key motivator.)

“Visual arts offer a new language in which to convey the spiritual and sacred in human experience,” she said. “Rather than letters, words, rhyme, symbolic meter, they employ line, color, shade, textures to offer up expressions of the ineffable in a form of communication that can transcend language, geography, and cultures.”

Visual arts also foster mutual understanding. “We are realizing that more and more, art can be a tool for empathy in an era where it is much needed,” Whitaker said. “An image can do so much that text and speaking cannot.”

“Art is an access point to the soul,” she added. “It opens us up to feel another’s deep experiences.”

To Elif Gokcigdem, author of the books *Fostering Empathy Through Museums* and *Designing for Empathy: Perspectives on the Museum Experience* (for which I co-authored a chapter), empathy involves mirror neurons in the brain attuning to emotions and feelings that art can express creatively.

“Artists often use emotional experiences in their art as inspiration, while at the same time also aiming to evoke an emotional response in the viewer,” she said. “Through its connections to emotions, art then becomes the perfect tool to explore empathy.”



But, to Gokcigdem, empathy isn’t an automatic outcome of making or experiencing art. Sociocultural and economic background and worldview, as well as effort and an open mind, can affect one’s understanding and empathetic choices.

Gokcigdem associates the sacred with the wholeness of humanity and the planet. She finds meaning in geometric patterns of Islamic art and architecture. “They represent the oneness of all beings,” she said. “I cannot think of empathy without the context of oneness; in a way, empathy for me is a way to explore my interconnectedness with this whole, or One.”

When she looks at a tile-covered dome, whose design suggests interconnected star constellations, Gokcigdem imagines the intricate ensemble’s origin as a seemingly insignificant dot on a piece of paper that birthed lines, shapes, stars, and the entire design, appearing to have no beginning or end. She envisions herself at the center.

“I imagine extending my arms and whirling like a compass, one foot on this central point, hands reaching out to touch all the dots that collectively form a circle around me, my circle,” she said. “From my vantage point, I can only see my circle and perhaps a few that are around me, but when I look at myself from the perspective of the whole, my humble stature becomes essential, and meaningful as part of a greater whole.”

Locating herself within sacred artwork, Gokcigdem believes she’s situated perfectly to probe and respect others’ perspectives. “Museums encourage us to understand, emotionally engage with, and contemplate this profound truth, and help us to become more responsive to the needs of those around us and of our environment,” she said. ✦

**“VISUAL ARTS OFFER
A NEW LANGUAGE IN
WHICH TO CONVEY
THE SPIRITUAL AND
SACRED IN HUMAN
EXPERIENCE.”**

Menachem Wecker is a freelance reporter in Washington, D.C., and a board member at the National Press Club. The Fetzer Institute is a financial donor to Sojourners.

THE SOUND OF PRESENCE

By Abby Olcese

In his book *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*, Rowan Williams writes, “We are easily persuaded that the problem of growing up in the life of the spirit can be located outside ourselves.” In other words, we like to think if only it weren’t for a health problem or professional situation, our lives would be better. If we put off becoming the person we are called to be because we’re waiting for the “right” circumstance, then we won’t learn and grow. Even when circumstances need to change, we must find joy in the present.

This same lesson powers Darius Marder’s drama *Sound of Metal*, about a drummer, Ruben (Riz Ahmed), who’s suddenly affected with permanent hearing loss. Ruben’s journey underlines the importance of presence and its potential to foster spiritual growth. He must learn that the situation he is in presents an opportunity to embrace a new community and a more intentional life.

Ruben and his girlfriend Lou (Olivia Cooke) are members of a heavy metal duo. When the film begins, they’re happily cohabitating in a trailer, living gig to gig. Ruben’s hearing loss puts a stop to this and threatens to resurface the addictive patterns that defined his earlier life. This leads Ruben to a community for deaf people in recovery, led by Joe (Paul Raci), a deaf recovering alcoholic. Ruben is fixated on getting cochlear implants so he can return to his life with Lou. Joe tries to help Ruben understand that his new reality gives him the chance to live a different life in a supportive setting where he can thrive.

Through Ruben’s changing attitude and loving relationships with his new community, it’s clear he’s where he should be. Ruben, however, must discover this for himself. He starts in a place of frustration and fear, then moves to a belief he’s finally attained what’s required to return to his old life, only to realize that life is no longer what he needs.

Joe describes the silence he lives with to Ruben as “the kingdom of God,” providing a stillness that gives him peace. Throughout the movie, Marder uses sound design to take us inside Ruben’s experience, and when he finally receives his implants, the staticky result is overwhelming. In the final scene, Ruben shuts them off, and we join him in a silence echoing the tranquility Joe describes. We leave Ruben having finally understood the importance of engaging with his life as it is, not as he thinks it should be. It’s a lesson we all contend with: to allow God to work through us where we are, and grow into the people God wants us to be, even when that looks different from our expectations. ♦

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

A SHARED HISTORY

Based on Andrea Levy’s novel of the same name, *The Long Song* depicts a young woman coming of age in Jamaica, anticipating the imminent end to slavery and her servitude. The series displays Britain’s colonial history with the island and crafts a gripping rendering of survival, insurgence, and joy.

PBS



Radical Repair

Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation presents practices from Indigenous experts to repair the harm children have endured due to colonial legacies. Edited by Valerie E. Michaelson and Joan E. Durrant, this practical book reimagines raising children. **University of Manitoba Press**



‘A Redemptive Force’

The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song explores this sacred legacy and its significance in American history, tracing a lineage of prophetic witness. Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s book accompanies a four-hour documentary on PBS. **Penguin Press**



ART FOR THE PEOPLE

By
Faith-Marie
Zamblé



Curated

If you would be so kind, I'd like for you to do an experiment with me. Think about a famous work of art, a painting so widely considered Important and Valuable its status could never be questioned. Maybe you're debating between

"The Starry Night" or "Mona Lisa." Maybe you're considering something else entirely: Monet's endless assortment of water lilies, for example. Good. Hold the image in your mind and recall, if you can, the work's textures, its colors and its moods. Do you like the piece? Do you remember when you first encountered it?

Now, having answered those questions, imagine that someone has stolen it. This mysterious person explains that they are holding the painting hostage until works falsely attributed to the artist in question are exposed as fraudulent. They sign their manifesto with the words, "You will come to agree with me." What would that do for the public imagination?

Blue Balliett explores this question in her 2004 novel, *Chasing Vermeer*, and though its main characters are sleuthy sixth graders, I find its basic premise has much to offer even to jaded adults (see: me). A Vermeer painting on its way to the Art Institute of Chicago—"A Lady Writing"—disappears mid-journey, and the thief posits a series of challenges to art historians and the broader world. Petra and Calder, two intrepid University of Chicago Laboratory School students, find themselves caught in the painting's thrall and, through a series of dreams and coincidences, set out to find the "Lady." But they're not alone.

WE TALKED ABOUT THE POLITICAL (AND GENDERED) NATURE OF PORTRAITS.

In the blink of an eye, Vermeer becomes a subject of constant debate. So-called "unqualified" people chatter in taxis and restaurants about whether Vermeer's later paintings actually bear a resemblance to his more famous (and luminous) work, "Girl with a Pearl Earring." Petra and Calder's class compares brushstrokes on various Vermeer reproductions, taking a vote on which paintings should be considered legitimate. Mutiny descends on the art establishment. Mutiny, yes, because a delicate painting has vanished, but also because a branch of knowledge that is shrouded in esotericism and fancy degrees is now under scrutiny. By stealing "A Lady Writing," the thief has returned the public's right to have opinions about it.

When I first encountered *Chasing Vermeer* as a 9-year-old, I was thrilled. Nothing sounded better than mysteries solved with friends. It was a simple and pure love. Revisiting the book now, many years later, I am struck by how much of the story still thrills me. Balliett wrote my favorite alternate dimension into being, where art isn't a stuffy thing behind glass but a conversation hundreds of years in the making.

A few years ago, the National Gallery of Art in D.C. opened a show on Dutch portraiture featuring several loaned Vermeers. Unsurprisingly, the line for the exhibition snaked through the main atrium. When I finally got into the room, a fellow visitor struck up a conversation with me and we talked about the political (and gendered) nature of portraits. I'm sure a curator would have been dismayed to hear us, but it didn't matter. We were, in our own ways, chasing Vermeer. And, looking at the knowing expression of "A Lady Writing," I have a feeling he wouldn't mind being found. ✕

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.



AMERICAN FARCE

To Start a War: How the Bush Administration Took America Into Iraq, by Robert Draper
and *Patriotic Dissent: America in the Age of Endless War*, by Daniel A. Sjursen

Heyday, Penguin Press

There's a tragic truth behind America's endless war since 9/11: It's based on lies. Two recent books confront the lies. Robert Draper and Danny Sjursen independently critique the arguably the worst foreign policy blunder in modern U.S. history.

To Start A War is Draper's account of how the second Bush administration used 9/11 to justify invading Iraq, which was not involved in the attacks. An author's note opens his treatise: "This is a story bracketed by two defining tragedies of the 21st century. The first was an unprovoked attack on America's homeland. ... The second, 18 months later, was an act of war by America against a sovereign nation that had neither harmed the United States nor threatened to do so." Draper masterfully unravels the Bush administration's litany of lies following the labyrinthine road to war from the White House to Foggy Bottom, the Pentagon, and Congress, through national security and intelligence agencies, the diplomatic corps, and military ops. The reader becomes privy to real people

FOUR PRESIDENTS AND TWO DECADES LATER, "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED" IS MORE ENDLESS WAR.

and conversations. Every page stirs outrage.

The end of the road? Six weeks into war, President George W. Bush swaggered across the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, flashed thumbs up, and pronounced, "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended." Overhead hung a red, white, and blue "Mission Accomplished" banner. Draper concludes, "The slogan accurately reflected the Bush administration's wishful thinking and grandiose sense that history had already been made."

Four presidents and two decades later, "Mission Accomplished" is more endless war.

In *Patriotic Dissent: America in the Age of Endless War*, Sjursen is blunt: "The Bush team fabricated, twisted, misinterpreted, and tactically leaked intelligence in order to manufacture and sell an outright invasion to the American people. Then they lied about the whole thing—blatantly, repeatedly, and routinely."

Most Americans, including Sjursen, willfully believed the lies. Then Bush's 2007 surge sent Sjursen to Baghdad as a soldier, where his eyes were opened. "The horror, the futility, the farce of war in Iraq," he confesses, "was the turning point of my life ... I knew that war was built on lies, ill-advised, unwinnable, illegal, immoral."

Sjursen brilliantly weaves personal memoir, professional analysis, and peace activism in a long-overdue challenge to false

patriotism rooted in American exceptionalism and entitlement. He identifies three patriotisms. "Pageantry Patriotism" is blind devotion to country symbolized by "flags, parades, anthems, pledges of allegiance, yellow ribbons," and "vapid adulation of soldiers." "Passively Principled Patriotism" is more subdued loyalty that willfully falls in line to "support America and its troops" for every war.

In contrast, Sjursen poses a third way: "Participatory Principled Patriotism." This "higher loyalty," writes Sjursen, "to which I unapologetically subscribe," at times demands our "Patriotic Dissent." Rooted in national history, yet largely ignored, "it is a patriotism grounded in ... Webster's 1828 definition, placing maintenance of America's aspirational values—'laws,' 'rights,' and 'institutions' ... to 'support and defend' the Constitution" above blind allegiance. U.S. history bears witness to the patriotic dissenters who "risked careers, reputations, and personal safety to defend the dream of the United States."

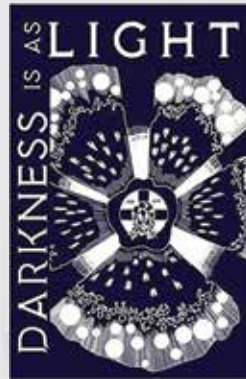
Danny Sjursen has the wisdom to articulate, and the audacity to join, the lustrous tradition of patriotic dissent to America's endless lie of war. ✕

Weldon Nisly is a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams, serving primarily in Iraqi Kurdistan.

HER RECOGNITION

Darkness is as Light,
edited by Summer Kinard

Park End Books



W

We are living in dark times. A perfectly timed and distinctive new devotional, *Darkness is as Light*, wrestles with the dark, and from its many entries emerges a clear chronicle of the real power and meaning of God's grace for us even—especially—in the dark.

The book consists of nine sections of eight entries each, beginning with a poem by Tennessee poet Allison Boyd Justus. Meditations by 22 authors are based on scriptural texts and grouped by theme: provision, sweetness, healing, death, balm, help, trial, consolation, and closeness. Graphic artist David Moses created striking cover art and illustrations for each section.

These are self-consciously women's words based on women's experiences. In her introduction, publisher and editor Summer Kinard draws connections from these modern meditations to ancient women mystics and a kind of Gothic spiritual ethos. There are occasional visions recounted in these pages, and a miracle or two, but mainly we see the range of women's lived experiences, met every step of the way by grace. The grace of Christ shared with shunned St. Photine, the woman at the well. Ravages of bipolar disorder. Sexual abuse. Food insecurity, homelessness, inability to pay the rent. Leaving an abusive spouse. Caretaking for a chronically ill spouse. Sheltering from an abusive parent. Loss of a child. Unexpected surgeries. The exhaustion of mothering five young children.

But this collection is not a downer—far from it. Each entry sings with one theme: *Christ is present*. And it is this present God we can trust to sustain us, draw us closer, and sanctify us, no matter what.

The volume does bring tears—of recognition, shared sorrow, and joy. It is best to use as intended, reading only one entry per day, but it is so inviting that the reader wants to spend more time in the presence of these women, learning from their hard-won wisdom. Readers from Protestant traditions might find some of the language and spirituality—drawing on traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy—new to them, but the devotional will be welcomed by all readers

seeking to deepen their knowledge of Christ and understood by anyone who has ever been subjected to the confusion of darkness and suffering.

Stasia Braswell's entry on Matthew 28:1 draws together many of the separate threads throughout the volume as she meditates on hope. "Hope is not a subjective experience, but a crown of martyrdom, an orientation toward truth and beauty that chooses Christ and Christ again," Braswell writes. "Even when there is every indication that I have been abandoned, hope is an action, a ritual, a process. It is never a feeling, but a choice. Hope is a patient endurance of emotion, of grief and suffering and failure. Hope is repentance. Turning back, getting up, and choosing Christ. Even when I am blind and stumbling, when God feels distant and silent: Christ is harrowing and hallowing the grave."

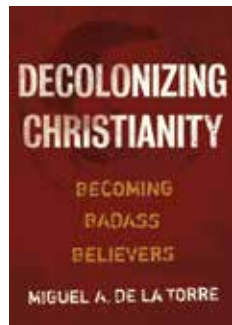
We desperately need this kind of hope now, to light our way in this present darkness and draw us through to the light, that we may share the light of God's boundless grace with all those around us. ♦

Julie Vassilatos is a writer and Orthodox Christian in Chicago.

FAMILY VALUES?

An excerpt from
Decolonizing Christianity:
Becoming Badass Believers,
by Miguel A. De La Torre

Eerdmans



Eurocentric Christianity, since the days of Constantine, has predominately served as an apologist for authoritarian regimes, be they emperors, kings, crusading popes, or military dictators. In the last century alone, Eurocentric Christian jargon sustained and supported brutal regimes guilty of unimaginable human rights violations. Think of how the Catholic Church, fearing the loss of power during Spain's Second Republic, threw its support behind the right-wing politics of the usurper Francisco Franco, who cloaked himself as a defender of religious liberties. The church stood by him as he ignited a civil war against the secularization of society, turning a blind eye to the Spanish killing fields. ...

We also cannot forget that the rise of Hitler was aided by conservative Protestant Christians calling for *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*. This is not to say all conservative Christians are fascists, nor that the left is innocent of harboring those who exploit secularism to impose intolerance. Multiple leftist dictatorships around the world are as oppressive as right-wing dictatorships. Still, the point is that conservative Christians have maintained a tolerance for family values promoted by authoritarian rulers who have engaged in all sorts of heinous injustices in Christ's name. If indeed Christ is the head of the church, and man is the head of his wife, then why be surprised when Euro-American Christianity celebrates patriarchy? What many of us find damnable is that proclamations of "family values" become the basis for a populist movement that is defining its family values by separating Brown families at the border. ❖

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SPIDER

By Benjamin Schmitt



Crossing a river in Africa the spider
 shooting her blacksmith's thread
 of melted-down swords and armor
 the world's molten madness bridging
 dangling over the water

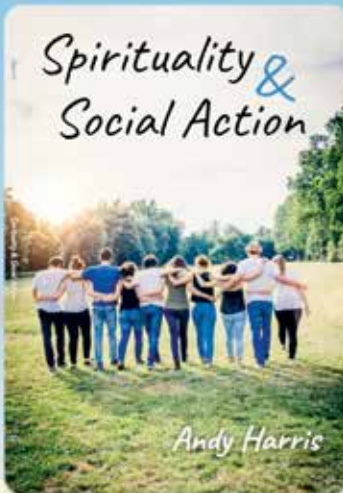
The creature moves frantically
 and to an observer miraculously
 like some stressed-out downtown commuter
 levitating to work
 surely this is a phantasmagorical
 outpouring of mighty engineering
 Golden Gate sprung from a thimble
 that you would never believe
 if it hadn't bored you in second grade
 like the kindness of Jesus Christ

When we wake up we must scrub
 our knowledge with wonder every day
 we must become stupidly smart
 reciting information about toenails
 excited that they actually exist

See how the web spans the breadth of the river
 sparkling in the sunlight
 like the grid of a future city
 this great cathedral of feasting
 towers above the current
 the spider has toiled on her masterpiece
 intricate painting for the dead to be held
 the bugs writhe in the snare
 the spider climbs to wrap each of them
 in the gloom of grace and light

Benjamin Schmitt, author of *Soundtrack to a Fleeting Masculinity*, lives in Seattle.

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CAPTIVE TO SIN, HEALED FOR JUSTICE

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle B

By Isaac S. Villegas



Living the Word

"We're captured by sin, we're captive to a power," said theologian Stanley Hauerwas, "not as something so much that I do as something that I'm captured by and that I don't even recognize as captivity."

In this month's scriptures, we confront the captivity of sin—social forces that diminish life, powers of oppression that colonize our desires. Sin whispers lies about the world, deceptions that lead to harmful acts—harmful for our personal lives with neighbors and our collective lives as a society.

The gospel passages assigned for the first and last Sundays spotlight the sinful power of money—from the marketplace's corruption of the temple courts to Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus in exchange for silver. Money bookends Lent. We cannot talk about Jesus without talking about how mammon worms itself into our longings—the allure of wealth, the power of profits.

Jesus enacts liberation from the sinfulness of the thrall of money. In John 2, Jesus frees people from money's bondage by scattering gold and silver in the streets. He seizes the currency of the bankers. He redistributes the wealth of the few into the pockets of the many. The reign of God will involve an economic overhaul. Lent would be a fitting season to tax the rich and to cancel student and medical debt.

Isaac S. Villegas is pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship and president of the governing board of the North Carolina Council of Churches.

**SIN WHISPERS LIES ABOUT THE
WORLD, DECEPTIONS THAT LEAD
TO HARMFUL ACTS.**

MARCH 7

REDISTRIBUTE WEALTH

EXODUS 20:1-17; PSALM 19;
1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25; JOHN 2:13-22

Jesus takes a trip to the temple for Passover, a holy festival to remember Israel's salvation from the shackles of Egyptian bondage, freedom from their forced labor, and liberation from economic exploitation. Jesus joins the throngs gathered for prayer and sacrifices.

When he arrives, Jesus is filled with anger, furious at the sight of merchants exploiting the piety of pilgrims. Holy anger courses through his veins as he braids cords into a whip. Zealous devotion pulses in his hands as he overturns tables, spilling money onto the sidewalks. Jesus doesn't call for the end of sacrifices, of worship practices, of the holy liturgies and rituals of his people. Instead, he is enraged at power brokers of the economy, the money-hungry capitalists doing anything for a profit.

He weaves cords into a whip, but he doesn't attack any person with it. Rather, he drives out the animals (John 2:15). In his righteous anger he becomes a shepherd, herding cattle. Neither does he threaten bankers with death or physical harm; instead, he destroys their tables and scatters their money. Jesus doesn't hurt people or threaten to; he does, however, damage the marketplace while returning animals and coins back to the crowds.

In his cracking of the whip, in his destruction of a commercial area, we glimpse the same holy rage that rouses protesters to turn against buildings—the people's righteous hunger for justice consuming a city, their outrage at the abusive force of police.

In the second century, Heracleon described this scene in Jerusalem as the work of the Spirit. "The whip is an image of the power and energy of the Holy Spirit," he wrote. The holiness of God disrupts the order of a world established for the benefit of the wealthy and powerful.

MARCH 14

ETERNAL LOVE

NUMBERS 21:4-9; PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22;
EPHESIANS 2:1-10; JOHN 3:14-21

"For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16) may be one of the most over-branded and least-understood scripture passages. The Bible is one long narrative about God's commitment to this world, to creation, to all that has been from the beginning—ecosystems and galaxies, snails and stars, communities of life in your neighborhood and in the skies. That is what we hear in these words of Jesus. That is what unfolds in scene after scene of his life: a singular commitment to save what has been lost, to restore what has been neglected, and to heal what has been wounded.

The Greek word for "salvation" in this passage (verse 17) is borrowed from first-century medical discourse. To "save" meant to heal, to stitch up a wound, to perform a surgery, to administer a vaccine for an infectious disease. Salvation is God's act to heal us from sin, to restore us from all that harms us and our neighbors.

Not only does the Greek word harken to the medical profession, but this particular passage returns us to a story of healing in Numbers 21. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," Jesus says about himself, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). Jesus identifies himself with the bronze snake from an odd story—a story about curing people who had been bitten by poisonous snakes (Numbers 21:9). Jesus presents himself as the antidote for what afflicts Israel. The mission of Jesus is to bring us into the care of God's love, which is our medicine.

As Christians we believe that Jesus shows us what God's love looks like, the love that created us, sustains us, and heals us. When we look at the life of Jesus, we see the heart of God, the pulse of the universe. Jesus is God's invitation to join the work of healing, salvation, and eternal life in the here and now.

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

MARCH 21

BODY KNOWLEDGE

JEREMIAH 31:31-34; PSALM 119:9-16;
HEBREWS 5:5-10; JOHN 12:20-33

In Jerusalem during a Jewish festival, a group of foreigners approached Philip. "We wish to see Jesus," they told him (John 12:21). These outsiders have heard the rumors about this rabbi Jesus. Might he be the Messiah of Israel, the one who will free God's people from Roman dominion? These seekers were in the crowds earlier in the day. They saw Jesus' triumphal entry into the city. They watched the people of Jerusalem gather in the streets to welcome Jesus as the redeemer, the liberator: "Blessed is the King of Israel!" (verse 13, NIV).

Jesus fueled the flames of revolution with his response. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (verse 23). "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out" (verse 31). The people are ready for a political upheaval. Soon, however, Jesus will disappoint those expectations. He isn't crowned as king in a palace. Instead, soldiers arrest him, torture him, and lead him to Golgotha. He dies with a crown of thorns, not of gold, on his head. What sort of victory is this? What kind of glorification?

If we want answers, if we want to know who he is, we must follow him. "Follow me," Jesus offers as invitation (verse 26) to the group of Greeks who earlier asked Philip about him. To know Jesus, to have faith in God, is something we do with our whole lives—with our hands and feet, as much as with our heads and hearts. Sixteenth-century Anabaptist theologian Hans Denck reminds us: "We cannot know Christ unless we follow him daily in life." Knowledge of God is bodily. Theology is ethics; ethics is theology. We believe with our daily lives.

**TO KNOW JESUS,
TO HAVE FAITH IN GOD,
IS SOMETHING WE DO
WITH OUR WHOLE LIVES.**

MARCH 28

CULPABLE DISCIPLES

ISAIAH 50:4-9; PSALM 31:9-16;
PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; MARK 14:1-15:47

As a youth I flipped through *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, a storybook of Protestants killed for their faith. During my college years in the late 1990s, a Christian rap group called dc Talk got together with The Voice of the Martyrs to publish *Jesus Freaks*, a collection of martyrdom stories to serve as anti-communist propaganda for evangelicals. As for Roman Catholics obsessed with martyrs, cultural critic George Weigel posited a few years back that "more Christians died for the faith in the twentieth century than in the previous 19 centuries of Christian history combined." Weigel continued, "Solidarity with the persecuted Church is an obligation of Christian faith."

Theologian Candida Moss has identified a "persecution complex" within right-leaning Christianity in the West. In *The Myth of Persecution*, Moss diagnoses a "victim mentality" in many of these revisionist hagiographies, a mentality that positions the Christian reader in solidarity with those subjected to violence, not as the persecutor. "By fixating on persecution," Moss observes, "we're allowing ourselves to overlook a great deal of injustice."

Mark 14, in contrast, invites readers to see ourselves in the role of duplicitous disciples as they betray, abandon, and deny Jesus. Scene after scene recounts the failure of the faithful. Peter, James, and John fall asleep after Jesus tells them he needs their companionship (verses 32-42). Judas Iscariot, Jesus' friend, hands him over to the authorities (verses 43-46). And Peter lies three times to distance himself from Jesus (verses 66-72).

While martyrologies invite readers to locate themselves with the persecuted victim to amplify a "heroic" faith, the gospel stories position Christians with Jesus' disciples who fail him. We followers of Jesus are like the three friends who sleep through his night of torment. We are like Judas and Peter, in need of forgiveness for our betrayals.

Lent is a time for repentance: to consider how we've abandoned the Christ who comes to us as a stranger, as a neighbor, as the one whom our society rejects. ✕

H'rumps



THE SHOTS HEARD ROUND THE WORLD

By Ed Spivey Jr.

At this point, vaccines for COVID-19 have been administered to hundreds of thousands of Americans, all of whom waited patiently for Donald Trump's family to be treated first. Also, to all Republicans in the House and the Senate who tried to overturn the election. And people named Rudy, probably. This follows the latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance that assigns first priority to people who attempt to undermine democracy. Repeatedly. (Hopefully, the vaccine will also include a dose of shame, for those who have none.)

So far, few side effects from the vaccine have been reported, other than mild headaches, a slight fever, and an uncontrollable urge to watch *The Queen's Gambit* again. Some recipients exhibited abhorrent anti-social behavior, which experts feared was a psychological reaction to the injection. But it turned out Sens. Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz (R-Sedition) have always been like that. The vaccine was not the cause and, sadly, not the cure.

Meanwhile, those of us still waiting for the vaccine are honoring the clear protocols of the CDC. Vaccinations first go to health care workers, then to the elderly, particularly those in senior care centers. Fortunately for me, the wait won't be much longer. Because of my daughter I'm nurse-adjacent, and if I throw my arms around her for a well-timed hug, who's to say which arm gets the shot? I'm also well over 65—the minimum age for elderly recipients—although I'm cursed with the body of a 64-year-old. I hope that won't count against me.

I don't live in a senior care center, but I used to visit one frequently, and I'm confident my 96-year-old father who lives there would happily give up his place in line. As I often remind him, "Dad, you never stop being a parent, even if you move several states away and change your phone number. We always find you." I strongly believe a father never loses responsibility

STANDING IN LINE IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL, BUT BETTER FOR THE PEOPLE IN FRONT OF YOU.

for his children, particularly as they age.

That said, I guess now I'll just wait for the call from the CDC, or my HMO, or the neighbor across the street who says he knows a guy. But can I choose my vaccine? There are a couple of variations, but one needs to be kept at subzero temperatures. A doctor's cold stethoscope is bad enough, but a frigid injection might be worse than the brain freeze you get from chugging a Slurpee. (That's one of life's harsh but poignant lessons. You don't make that mistake twice.)

Pharmaceutical companies deserve our deepest gratitude for making these vaccines in record time, a life-saving effort that sprang from their selfless concern for the public good. Sorry, I'm being silly. They did it for the billions of federal dollars that rained down on them like manna from heaven, only less sticky. And for the billions more they can charge for the doses they're now shipping to hospitals, municipalities, and that guy my neighbor knows. (I hope he has the one that's closer to room temperature.)

Not that I would ever judge the motivations of a corporation. They're people too, you know. When God passed out the various roles we all play in society, corporations just happened to get the one that gorges at the public trough until its belly bursts. The rest of us got what was left.

But it's a clear victory for modern medicine. And with this effort coming to fruition, we hope the world's scientists will turn to their next health challenge: unfreezing the brains of 74 million Americans who wanted a second helping of, figuratively speaking, a giant orange slurpee—and the excruciating headaches that came with it. (*Editor's note: It's over. He's gone. Move on.*)

You're right, sorry. (GOLF CHEATER! Okay, I'm done.)

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.



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